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## MARXIST DIALECTICS AND RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Lawrence Grossberg

MANY have addressed the relationship between dialectics and rhetoric, but few have given attention to the possibility of using dialectics to understand the nature of rhetorical criticism. And only recently have communication scholars begun to pay attention to the major contemporary (i.e., Marxian) school of dialectics. In this essay, I will attempt to offer some suggestions for using Marxist interpretations of dialectics to begin clarifying the act of rhetorical criticism, a project suggested by the work of Kenneth Burke.<sup>1</sup>

*Mr. Grossberg is Assistant Professor of Speech Communication, University of Illinois—Urbana-Champaign. A briefer version of this essay was presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Minneapolis, 1978. Jeffrey Maitland and Calvin O. Schrag of Purdue University and Charles Laufersweiler and Cary Nelson of the University of Illinois provided valuable suggestions and criticisms during its preparation.*

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (1945; rpt. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969). Although Burke seems to begin by equating dialectics with his dramatistic theory, he recognizes the latter to be merely one form of dialectics. Dialectics is "the employment of the possibilities of linguistic transformations" (p. 402). The dialectic, grounded in the negative, is intimately tied to humanity's symbolic nature; it is called into existence by the fundamental paradox of language and the creation of a symbolic world: Words are not the things they

I will consider three basic interpretations of the dialectic coexisting in the writings of contemporary Marxists: dialectics as a mode of thought, of description, and of discourse. Obviously, these are not exclusive alternatives but differing moments or aspects of the dialectic. As a result, dialectics can be seen to embody, respectively, a theory of understanding, of explanation, and of discourse. Correspondingly, each of these moments will be used to shed light on the task of rhetorical criticism: on the

signify. Thus, Burke begins with an understanding of dialectics as discourse. On the other hand, the dialectic is intimately connected with the notions of identification and consubstantiation as visionary terms: It is through the dialectic that one can overcome the apparent diversity to arrive at "the principle of oneness." Dialectic, then, is the method by which one transcends the division constituted by language by linguistically transforming it into identification; it is the method by which something can become that which it is not. At this point, Burke's theory is clearly similar in some respects to the "metaphorical view" presented below. Finally, Burke's argument that "*rhetoric . . . is rooted in an essential function of language itself . . . the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols*" [Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950; rpt. Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1969), p. 43] suggests the leap into a metonymical theory of discourse: Rhetorical discourse is constitutive of communication.

way in which the critic relates to the language of the text, on the nature of language which makes such a relation possible, and on the nature of the discourse of rhetorical criticism.

Of course, these are not the only questions that one could ask, nor is Marxism the only set of answers one can find. Nevertheless, it may prove interesting and worthwhile to consider the potential contribution of a Marxist reading of dialectics to an understanding of rhetorical theory and criticism. Consequently, the following method is not presented argumentatively, but—as a phenomenologist might describe it—poetically.

#### DIALECTICS AS A MODE OF THOUGHT

By describing dialectics as a mode of thought, I do not mean to equate it with a particular formal logic, such as that encapsulated in Fichte's triadic schema of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Rather, it is a mode of understanding or interpretation and not a formalizable system of logic. Jean Wahl has described it as "a pathway. Moreover, in the very word dialectic, there is the idea of *dia*, through. The dialectic is a way rather than a point of arrival."<sup>2</sup> I shall characterize dialectical thinking in four ways.

First, dialectical thinking is *concrete*. It is opposed to any abstractive system of thought, that is, to any system which begins with the generality (e.g., class membership) of its object and its parts. Lenin's statement that "truth is always concrete"<sup>3</sup> suggests that the attempt to understand some phenomenon necessitates dealing with it in its own concrete

uniqueness and particularity. The "concreteness" of *Finnegan's Wake* is radically different from the "concreteness" of capitalism. One's thinking about some phenomenon, then, is determined in part by the particularity of that phenomenon.

Second, by the demand of concreteness, dialectics commits all serious thought to study a phenomenon through its *relations* with other phenomena. That is, such thought must look at any phenomenon's interconnectedness with everything that is not the phenomenon itself, both synchronically and diachronically. Any thing can be understood only in the nexus of the relations in which it now exists, out of which it has developed, and into which it shall develop.<sup>4</sup> Obviously, one can never complete such a task; dialectical thinking is a project, a continuing process of interpretation within the framework of a concrete totality of relations rather than in terms of the separate, abstract, analyzed parts.

Third, relations are understood through the sign of negation, i.e., as *contradictions*. Abstract thinking begins with the assumption that everything is what it is, and is not what it is not. Dialectics argues that this logic of either/or reifies classifications, seeing each term as a constant isolatable item or segment of reality. Dialectical thinking, on the other hand, begins with the idea of opposition or negation inherent in any phenomenon. But it is not a simple assertion of the coexistence of opposites within contradictions. Dialectics is thinking precisely about the way

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Phillip Bosserman, *Dialectical Sociology* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1968), p. 227.

<sup>3</sup> V. I. Lenin, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*. Cited in Maurice Cornforth, *Materialism and the Dialectical Method* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> It is the systematicity of all reality which is expressed in the notion of totality or totalization. See, e.g., Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971); and Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From The Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

in which opposition or difference produces identity. That is, dialectics is a reflection on the way in which something is constituted as what it is only by the set of contradictions in which it exists, by that which it is not. Dialectical thinking is productive just because it cannot rest with contradiction, but must see how that contradiction functions within some totality. For this reason, dialectics cannot be identified with complementarity, interactionism, or talk about paradoxes: "While dialectical thinking does concern itself with what is paradoxical, it cannot, without a complete loss of meaning, be expressed in logically contradictory assertions."<sup>5</sup>

Finally, dialectical thought always relates to *human reality*.<sup>6</sup> The ground of dialectics is a particular conception of human existence as a totality constituted out of contradictions. Most simply, this can be understood as the subject-object relationship. In abstract thinking, "the object remains untouched . . . so that thought remains contemplative and fails to become practical [i.e., praxical]."<sup>7</sup> It is in praxis, the particular form of human experience/action, that one sees the "striking affinity which exists between the dialectic, as much a method as a real movement, and experience."<sup>8</sup> Dialectics points to its grounding in the structure of human existence, in the inescapable relation (opposition) between human life and the world which cannot be reduced or broken. Each is embedded within the other as that which gives each its identity. This situatedness, the interaction of the subjectivity of hu-

man consciousness and the objectivity of existence, defines praxis as an essentially dialectical mode of life. Once again, note that this use of "interaction" is not meant to be synonymous with the dialectic. It is an abstraction out of the dialectical character of praxis in which one is always confronted with the "embeddedness of the objective in our subjectivities and the corollary subjective reworking of the external world."<sup>9</sup>

This dialectical unity can be described synchronically as praxis, diachronically as historicity (i.e., human existence is a particular relation of past, present, and future), or through the medium in which this relationship is set up (i.e., "linguisticity"). More significant than the different ways in which the dialectics of experience can be described, however, is the consequence of this dialectical grounding: Dialectical thought is itself situated. Therefore, it must acknowledge its own situatedness, its own dialectical determination, and seek to become a reflexive thinking. Dialectical thinking must locate itself within the object of its reflections.

Thus, dialectical thought attempts to understand some phenomenon through its existence within a web of contradictions. Any phenomenon must always be seen as simultaneously presenting opposing perspectives. Ricoeur's argument that the will is both free and bound as well as Marx's view of humans as both nature and consciousness are both initial statements of a dialectical problem. The demand of dialectical thought is not to rest with a mere conjunction of opposites. But on the other hand, such a process does not necessarily assume the existence of a third term which relates the contradictions in a new synthesizing

<sup>5</sup> George J. Stack, "On the Notion of Dialectics," *Philosophy Today*, 15 (1971), 288.

<sup>6</sup> I am ignoring Frederick Engels' call for a "dialectics of nature." See *The Dialectics of Nature* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishers, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> Lukács, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Gurvitch, cited in Bosserman, p. 229.

<sup>9</sup> Robert F. Murphy, *The Dialectics of Social Life: Alarms and Excursions in Anthropological Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 206.

term, such as in Marx's appeal to praxis or human activity. One can just as appropriately appeal, for example, to the totality of the experience out of which the contradiction arises, such as Ricoeur's appeal to a "servile will."<sup>10</sup>

Adorno's discussion of society illustrates dialectical thinking without a third term; he begins by assuming that every idea of society is contradictory, and that these contradictions are significant indicators of humanity's relationship to the concrete reality of social life. Because society is not an empirical object, it must be a human abstraction out of concrete and immediate experience. And yet, precisely as an abstract supraindividual reality, it is present in every experience in the form of constraint. Thus, for Adorno, the contradictions of thought lead to an understanding of the object of those thoughts as well.<sup>11</sup> It is in this sense that one can understand that, in dialectical thought, "no superior principle is needed to unite the two terms, for their own nature is such that they imply both each other and the relation to each other. . . . The unifier of the dialectical terms does not transcend the terms themselves."<sup>12</sup> Thus, one can dispense with the notion of a totality within which the contradiction operates; the totality is nothing apart from the operation of the contradiction itself.

### *Dialectics and Rhetoric I*

I want now to raise the question of what such a theory of dialectics has to contribute to the critique of language in

general and to rhetorical criticism in particular. Criticism assumes something is unclear about the discourse it studies, that something else wants saying in another discourse. Broadly put, criticism that is not narrowly formalist must, as it reflects on the linguistic creations of people, attempt to understand the relationship between those linguistic creations and a concrete world of everyday life. To think dialectically about this aspect of language is to find a particular contradiction operating, a contradiction I shall call the dialectic of immanence and transcendence.

Language is always a social code or system. It functions to construct and maintain a shared social world within which the individual is also a center of creation. Individuals may use language to construct a world which is not that of the shared symbolic reality in which they live. In this sense, language may be used creatively, within limits, to transcend the stable order it embodies. In other words, language functions within the world of everyday affairs as the medium through which individuals exist in society. Individual, creative utterances are incorporated into the social code (becoming a part of language as tradition) as the expression of social and historical existence. Thus, immanence-transcendence points to the contradiction within language between tradition (as constraint) and creativity (as freedom).<sup>13</sup>

This contradiction also operates at another level. The meaning of any linguistic event is tied to a particular set of social and psychological conditions which determines its creation and interpretation. In short, the meaning of discourse is immanent within a particular

<sup>10</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, "What is Dialectical?" in *Freedom & Morality: The Lindley Lectures*, ed. John Bricke (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas, 1976), pp. 173-89.

<sup>11</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1973).

<sup>12</sup> Louis Dupré, *The Philosophical Foundations of Marxism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), p. 215.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, "Dialectical Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences," Diss. Illinois at Urbana-Champaign 1976, Ch. 6.

context. At the same time, language has an existence of its own, independent of the conditions of its use. The meaning of some event of discourse is carried in the words that retain some meaning beyond the context of their original utterance. Thus, the meaningfulness of language transcends its immanent context. This transcendent meaning provides, at the same time, the immanent context which individual utterances transcend.

Within this dialectic, the identification and isolation of the task of the rhetorical critic can begin. Dialectical thought raises a new problem for the critic—that of beginnings. Within dialectics, each term is defined both independently of and in terms of the other. The initial opposition is altered through dialectical reflection, locating it in a constituted or postulated unity in such a way that each term is itself a microcosm of the dialectic. The terms can be separated from one another only by an abstractive (and, hence, distorting) process. Thus, it is a mistake, in dialectical thinking, to identify one term with one member of the original opposition and the other term with the original opposing member. Each of the dialectical terms participates in both extremes of the dialectic and each is mediated through the totality, which is the way in which their contradiction constitutes each as existing only with the other. One cannot dissolve the constitutive power of the contradiction, even for methodological purposes. How, then, does one begin to reflect on some dialectical phenomenon, such as language as a dialectic of immanence and transcendence?

Because dialectics is reflective, one is already involved in the contradiction that one is confronting. It is only by self-consciously re-entering the contradiction that one's understanding can be coaxed

beyond itself. That is, the critic affirms the dialectic but as an unequal one. The critic weights one term—either immanence or transcendence—by the fact of individual faith and commitment. The weighted dialectic demands that the critic enter into the dialectic at a risk—the risk entailed by raising the problem of truth. The critic enters into a relationship in the form of a wager which the contradiction offers. Since the dialectic permits two readings of discourse in the world of practical affairs, the critic must become committed to one of the readings as essentially superior. Such a commitment does not ignore one term in favor of the other; instead, it begins with one of the terms, uses it to understand the other, returns to the first, and so forth. The movement of the dialectic and of dialectical thought can never be broken, but the critic can begin by risking the self in the work. Each stage in such dialectical thinking must then proceed to “decenter” or “demythologize” the previous stage by placing it back into the dialectic in which it is determined. The critic uses the terms of the relationship as the beginning, but must use them dialectically to escape the narrow understanding of the world in which the words hold the critic prisoner. The weighted dialectic allows the use of the contradiction as the door through which understanding must pass; it is only by wagering effort, by seeking to discover and assert some truth, that the critic can successfully create an understanding of criticism which is vital—both necessary and alive.<sup>14</sup>

The critic is forced to operate within such a dialectic because the object of

<sup>14</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian Univ. Press, 1976), p. 75; and Cary Nelson, “The Paradox of Critical Language: A Polemical Speculation,” *MLN*, 89 (1974), 1003-16.

concern is language itself, the very source of the dialectical structure of experience. Language is the expression of the already existing social world and, simultaneously, of the constant constitution of that world in language. Thus, it is through language that the world is both revealed and created. I have already described this dialectic of language as immanence and transcendence. The critic can escape the circle of contradiction only by recognizing that dialectical thinking mandates commitment of self to a particular relation to the discourse and by asserting that in such a relationship some truth of the human condition, be it actual or potential, can be discovered.

With an eye toward defining the rhetorical task, I can now offer an interpretation of the relation between rhetorical and (traditional) literary criticism. Each takes a different point of origin in the dialectic as its beginning; each makes a different wager. The rhetorical critic chooses to begin with the particular ways in which language functions within its context. The literary critic, on the other hand, assumes that by attempting to understand discourse as a creative, transcendent, and "objective" bearer of meaning, one can arrive at a clearer conception of the role of language in experience. Hence, while the literary critic typically focuses on the work of literature in order to judge its intrinsic merit, the rhetorical critic traditionally works with the premise that it is the relationship of speaker and audience in a particular context, fashioned through the resources of language, that is important. The rhetorical critic is concerned with understanding the ways in which people use language to affect personal and social change in a world of practical affairs. That is, the rhetorical critic is concerned with the ways in which language affects the everyday

world in which speaker and audience co-exist. This subtle, and never definitive, weighting of the dialectic of immanence and transcendence in favor of the former provides a primary basis from which to appreciate and preserve the rhetorical focus within the domain of the critical enterprise.

#### DIALECTICS AS A MODE OF DESCRIPTION

By proposing dialectics as description, I mean to suggest the possibility of giving an "account" of some event or phenomenon by appealing to its internal and/or external dialectical constitution (development). That is, I am using "descriptive" to refer to a kind of explanation built upon an appeal to a "deep" (and perhaps hidden) structure as accounting for the surface appearance. It is a "hermeneutic" description built upon dialectical thought so that the deep structure is characterized by contradictions. Stalin describes the traditional Marxist view of this descriptive function:

Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics holds that internal contradictions are inherent in all things and phenomena of nature, for they all have their negative and positive sides, a past and a future, something dying away and something developing; and that the struggle between these opposites, the struggle between the old and the new, between that which is dying away and that which is being born, between that which is disappearing and that which is developing, constitutes the internal content of the process of development, the internal content of the transformation of quantitative changes into qualitative changes.

The dialectical method therefore holds that the process of development from the lower to the higher takes place not as a harmonious unfolding of phenomena, but as a disclosure of the contradictions inherent in things and phenomena, as a 'struggle' of opposite tendencies which operate on the basis of these contradictions.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical*

For example, most of us are familiar with the Marxist interpretation of history or development, which makes the "unity and struggle of opposites" the "deep structure" of history. Thus, capitalism is explained through its inherent contradictions which reveal the role it plays in history. The class struggle is only the surface or external contradiction; it, itself, is produced by a contradiction located within the social system—the contradiction between socialized production and individualized appropriation. Although the relations of production have become social relations under capitalism, both the means and products of production are objects belonging to individuals. This is a particular instance of the even more general contradiction between the forces and relations of production that Marx uses to account for history. It is this fundamental contradiction that gives rise to the class conflict.

To give a second example: Within history, the role of the working class is to oppose, and, by its very nature, to negate the bourgeoisie, just as the middle class negated the feudal aristocracy before it. History is a battle of the new against the old in which the new stage could not have arisen except out of and in opposition to the old. Consequently, "the negation is a positive advance, brought about only by the development of that which is negated. The old is not simply abolished, leaving things as though it had never existed; it is abolished only after it has itself given rise to the conditions for the new stage of advance."<sup>16</sup>

Notice, however, that within this account are two uses of dialectical description. The first involves describing

a particular phenomenon—capitalism—through some fundamental and hidden contradiction. Only the second—the historical description—involves the more commonly recognized Hegelian dialectic in which thesis and antithesis are synthesized (*aufgehoben*) in a new whole:

Thesis and antithesis are resolved in such a way that the pretensions of each to constitute the whole of a relation are *denied*; yet aspects of each are retained or *conserved* in every new whole or situation; and are reinterpreted or *elevated* (*aufgehoben*) as subordinate moments in a more inclusive whole.<sup>17</sup>

Among contemporary Marxists, Althusser has offered one of the more cogent and suggestive readings of the descriptive dialectic in the concepts of structure in dominance, structural causality, and overdetermination.<sup>18</sup> Althusser attempts to account for the central role of economics in contemporary social reality without relying upon a theory of economic determinism. The latter is itself nondialectical. Alternatively, Althusser argues that all of the domains of social life are connected through a complex series of relationships of opposition and contradiction. Thus, social experience is describable as a structure; but this structure is organized hierarchically, in a series of patterns of domination. Thus, some domains have a determining influence on others, either directly or indirectly. Moreover, at any particular historical moment, this social formation can be characterized as having one particular domain (e.g., the political) in a supreme position of dominance and determination. Althusser calls this entire structure a "structure in dominance." If one then raises the question of what determines which domain is

*Materialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1940), p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Cornforth, p. 114.

<sup>17</sup> Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1962), p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Vintage, 1970), pp. 193-218.



dominant at some moment, Althusser's reply is that it is economics which is determinate "in the last instance."<sup>19</sup> The economic domain underlines and is ultimately responsible for determining the particular structure in dominance at any moment.

This structure as a totality exists only in the complex network of contradictions constituting the structure in dominance. Thus, any particular social event or phenomenon is "overdetermined"; that is, it is a "conjuncture" of the uneven instances or domains within the structure in dominance. It cannot be accounted for as a simple contradiction or a simple process of determination; instead, it must always be located within the complex unity of the structure in dominance, the particular social formation in which it exists.

Finally, Althusser addresses the problem of the relation between the hidden structure in dominance and the surface features and contradictions of everyday social life. That is, he faces the question of the way in which this determination in the last instance "causes" particular social formations. Althusser conceives of the causality of this process as one which is "nothing outside of its effects." The structure is not hidden beneath the surface but dispersed among its elements. Determination or historical causation cannot be understood by noting how a series of separate elements act upon one another since the determination involves a structured whole acting upon its elements. The cause exists only in its effects.

In Althusser, the dialectical determination of experience no longer requires a "hermeneutic description" postulating a deep structure or (transcendental) reality underlying the surface appearances of everyday life. Rather,

reality is the particular structure existing among the appearances, a structure which is determined in the last instance by the economic relations, but which is dominated by other elements in the hierarchical totality of the social formation.

### *Dialectics and Rhetoric II*

I have, thus far, limited my remarks on the relation of dialectics and rhetoric to one particular task—that of specifying the rhetorical domain or problematic. Dialectical thought suggests that rhetorical criticism can be seen as a particular weighting of the dialectic of immanence and transcendence in language. Althusser's reading of dialectical description permits a further step forward in the description or delimitation of the rhetorical domain; it suggests the possibility of a theoretical description of the immanence of language within socio-historical life by locating language within a structure in dominance. Such a dialectical account of language, both in its most general, theoretical form and in its particular descriptions of particular social formations, defines the domain within which a particularly rhetorical interest is to be located.

I am not prepared to offer the details of either level of such a description, but I would like to address one implication of such a dialectical account. If language exists immanently within a structure in dominance, then its relations to other moments within the social formation appear in terms of structural causality. This is, to be sure, a difficult notion, but at the very least it entails that the influence of any moment on another can be understood only within the set of relations constituting the particular structure in dominance. This is not to say that one can describe a particular relation within the social formation only

<sup>19</sup> But, "the last instance" never comes.



if one already knows the structure of the totality.<sup>20</sup> The nature of a specific relation depends on the structure of the particular social formation. Consequently, a discipline such as rhetoric, which defines itself through certain relations involving language, cannot define those relationships instrumentally. That is, rhetoric as a field of inquiry cannot be conceived of as explicating some particular form of influence, function, or causal relation. For the nature of language's relation to some other moment—and, hence, the very meaning of terms such as influence—will depend upon the particular structure in dominance. One must, therefore, seek a nonfunctional definition of the rhetorical problematic.

#### DIALECTICS AS A MODE OF DISCOURSE

By proposing dialectics as discourse, I mean to suggest that dialectics is both a particular style of discourse and the embodiment of a theory of discourse. Olson has argued that "all systems of philosophy have entertained or assumed some theory of discourse, either positive or negative, and . . . it has invariably affected the formulations of the philosophy."<sup>21</sup> That is, dialectical thought and description require a particular style of discourse (i.e., writing and speaking, language in use), where style refers to that which defines the individuality or uniqueness of any instance of discourse. This notion of style suggests the possibility of accounting for language as it exists in utterances and texts. By considering this final aspect of the dialectic, I hope to clarify further the source of

the productivity of dialectical thought and of the act of criticism itself.

Numerous authors have noted the stylistic demands of dialectics. Murphy has observed that "what is important . . . [about dialectics] is the mood and spirit of dialectical discourse."<sup>22</sup> More recently, Jameson, who has made this moment of dialectics the topic of investigation rather than a resource,<sup>23</sup> has argued that working a problem through dialectically (i.e., what I have called dialectical thinking and description) is (nothing but?) the writing of dialectical sentences. That is, dialectics is a stylistic or discursive choice before it is a substantive one.

For Jameson, dialectics is a particular view of language and its relation to thought; it is built upon an understanding of the nature of human experience and of the constitutive role of language within that experience. People are seen as active participants in the construction of reality. The world which confronts humanity appears in a state of constant flux, and humans give meaning to this world by imposing order on it through the interposition of symbolic structures or categories. It is only by so distancing ourselves from the "actuality" of the world that we exist as human beings. But this domain of human reality is already permeated with the seeds of its own denial, for the omnipresence of contradiction is constituted within the pre-predicative forms of praxis that relate humanity to the world.

According to Jameson, dialectical language is essentially metaphorical, the "just as . . . so" of the heroic simile.<sup>24</sup> The essentially dialectical relationship of consciousness (expressed) and reality—

<sup>20</sup> Compare this with the idea of the hermeneutic circle, especially in Ricoeur's move from an epistemological circularity to an ontological clash of worlds in *Interpretation Theory*, p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> Elder Olson, "The Dialectical Foundations of Critical Pluralism," *Texas Quarterly*, 9, No. 1 (1966), 208.

<sup>22</sup> Murphy, p. 97.

<sup>23</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

a relationship existing in and characterized as praxis—suggests that it is only through the use of figurative language that the contradictions found in a world of humanity's own creation can be constituted, expressed, and potentially overcome. Dialectics is "therefore marked by the will to link together in a single figure two incommensurable realities, two independent codes or systems of signs, two heterogeneous and asymmetrical terms."<sup>25</sup>

Metaphorical language rests upon the knowledge of what each of the opposing terms is or means. The fundamental shock that is the mark of the metaphor rests upon this ground: One can appreciate the explosion of meaning that occurs when the two discordant universes of meaning are brought together. A figure is like a poem which, as Valéry has said, functions to abolish and demolish the world.<sup>26</sup> Out of this destruction of the ordinary sense and reference of the world of language, out of this clash of semantic fields, and through the twist of meanings given to each of the terms, people are momentarily transposed into a new universe. Through the medium of the semantic tensions of the ordinary world, new possibilities of existence are opened.

Dialectics is, fundamentally, a form of creative fabrication, using language metaphorically to transcend immersion within the world of everyday life. In the natural attitude, the contradictions of experience appear to be structures of reality rather than structures resulting from the nature of human existence. Through the signification of what ap-

pears to be nonsense, metaphors are the linguistic mode whereby individual embeddedness in the everyday world is broken. At the same moment, the metaphor defines a different world—one in which the nonsense of the metaphor appears to make perfect sense. One knows what the metaphor means, even if one is unable to translate it into ordinary language. This untranslatability of the metaphor is the result of the connection which exists between language and the human world. The metaphor presents a different world in which the individual might live, not merely in imagination, but as an existential possibility. It is in this self-consciously constituted world that the contradiction is momentarily transcended.<sup>27</sup>

In this poetic universe, humanity discovers the power of the metaphor and the ground of dialectics, according to Jameson. For this new world of experience, created in and revealed through the metaphor, allows a glimpse of the human role in constituting the world within which the original contradiction appears as a paradox, as irreconcilable. Dialectical language is essentially humankind's attempt to escape momentarily their own role in constructing a universe, even while realizing the impossibility of the task. Dialectics, in the form of metaphorical language, reveals that the problem of contradiction is not a problem of reality, but, rather, a problem of and for symbol-using creatures in their attempt to make sense of experi-

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of Valéry's poetics, see Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision* (1954; rpt. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), pp. 97-124; and Jean Hytier, *The Poetics of Paul Valéry*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

<sup>27</sup> See Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, pp. 45-69; and Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1977). This view of metaphor can also be found in Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957); and Monroe Beardsley, "The Metaphorical Twist," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 22 (1962), 293-307.

ence. Dialectics manifests its power only in removing people from the world in which their being is defined only in its commitment to a world free of subjective construal. It attempts to make self-conscious the role of consciousness in constituting reality and, thus, in constituting the contradictions discovered there.<sup>28</sup> It does so by incarnating itself in language—in metaphor—so that humanity might catch a glimpse of a different world, a world also constituted by consciousness and, therefore, a world with its own contradictions. In this sense,

dialectical thinking is a thought to the second power, a thought about thinking itself, in which the mind must deal with its own thought process just as much as with the material it works on, in which both the particular content involved and the style of thinking suited to it must be held together in the mind at the same time.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, although dialectical thinking begins with an understanding of the terms that form the contradiction (or metaphor), dialectical discourse contributes to an understanding of the terms and their relationship. Yet it does not overcome or escape the contradiction. "The dialectic relation, therefore, makes each object a different (and therefore 'new') object as soon as they enter such relations [sic]."<sup>30</sup> This relation makes it impossible for dialectical thinking to identify the terms of the metaphor with the original terms of the contradiction. Dialectical discourse transcends the

everyday understanding through a dialectical mediation of the terms, but a mediation allowing for no mediating term outside of the metaphor itself.

In this way, dialectics simultaneously attacks the myths of objectivity and of idealism (i.e., "the optical illusion of the substantiality of thought itself"<sup>31</sup>). Thought cannot claim to create nor describe a world independently of the other. The dialectic is the expressive style of the recognition that understanding is always an affair of two elements, of two worlds. Dialectical discourse is an attempt to incarnate self-consciousness, to think simultaneously about some event while thinking about the processes through which one is able to think about it and the role one had in creating it. It is the expression in language of the situatedness of all thought. Dialectics then, according to Jameson, is able to transcend the contradictions which call it into existence by raising them to a new level, a level at which they can be seen as solutions rather than problems, as revelatory figures of the nature of human existence. Dialectics

aims, in other words, not so much at solving the particular dilemmas in question, as at converting those problems into their own solutions on a higher level, and making the fact and the existence of the problem itself the starting point for new research. This is indeed the most sensitive moment in the dialectical process: that in which an entire complex of thought is hoisted through a kind of inner leverage one floor higher, in which the mind, in a kind of shifting of gears, now finds itself willing to take what had been a question for an answer, standing outside its previous exertions in such a way that it reckons itself into the problem, understanding the dilemma not as a resistance of the object alone, but also as the result of a subject-pole deployed and disposed against it in a strategic

<sup>28</sup> Adorno's notion of the negative dialectic, however, limits the possibilities for escaping the paradoxical structure of experience. The goal of an ultimate synthesis, of the constitution of a world sans contradiction, must itself be negated in every concrete instance. Thus the claim of a dialectic to transcend a particular contradiction is itself a contradiction which must then be transcended.

<sup>29</sup> Jameson, p. 45.

<sup>30</sup> Carlos Castilla del Pino, "Foundations of Dialectic Anthropology: Of the Dialectic of Relations," *The Human Context*, 1 (1969), 399.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Ricoeur, personal interview, 1973. For a discussion of idealism, see Paul Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," *Noûs*, 9 (1975), 85-102.

fashion—in short, as the function of a determinate subject-object relationship.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, for Jameson, the choice of a dialectical theory is not one of a particular content so much as it is a choice of form or style. The choice is not, however, serendipitous, for dialectics is the expression in language of a particular view of the human. For active beings who play a role in the construction of the world, dialectics is the necessary self-consciousness within reflection which must find its expression in the language used to talk about the human condition.<sup>33</sup>

However, everything that dialectics has said thus far about language has been derivative. That is, given an understanding of dialectical thinking or description, these can be applied to language as a phenomenon. Even Jameson's description of dialectical discourse assumes a dialectical description of human existence. But it is possible to see language as a more foundational term in dialectics.

Just as Althusser has offered a "structuralist" rereading of dialectical description, there is an alternative, "structuralist" reading of dialectical discourse. Jameson assumes that the basic figure of rhetoric is the metaphor. Similarly, he postulates an identity or belonging-together (a relation of intentionality) between consciousness and world. Hence, there is still the possibility of escaping contradiction in a moment of self-consciousness. But if metaphor is the

figure of identity and transcendence, of totality and unity, metonymy is the figure of difference and immanence, of the denial of totality and unity, the figure of dispersion.

The distinction between metaphor and metonymy, as global categories organizing the universe of tropic discourse, depends upon the recognition that any linguistic message involves two modes of organization: selection (among entities) and combination (into complex unities). Jakobson has applied these principles—similarity or selection and contiguity or contexture—to the task of organizing the mass of figures. Metaphor operates by a substitution of terms through a postulation of similarity of meaning; it functions metalinguistically. Metonymy, on the other hand, operates connotatively, through what Lacan has called the "sliding of the signifier."<sup>34</sup> While metaphor involves selection and the assertion of equivalence, metonymy involves contextualization and the assertion of connection.

Lacan has pointed out that, since the metonymic process rests on a preexisting association (spatial, temporal, or causal) between the terms, only the metaphor is capable of creating new meaning, of transcending the accepted meanings and relations of the terms. However, metonymy is more fundamental since the metaphorical process works only because of the continued, contextual presence of the first term, even as it is absent in the metaphorical substitution. If metaphor creates new meaning by asserting identity between differing terms, metonymy disperses the unity within which terms are related by articulating their difference.

Although this radical reading of the metonymical process goes beyond Jakob-

<sup>32</sup> Jameson, pp. 307-08.

<sup>33</sup> Dialectics is, then, according to Jameson, an expression in part of the movement in phenomenology. In the natural attitude, contradictions appear in reality; in the reflective attitude, however, contradiction is seen as the constitutive structure of the pre-predicative life-world—or of Dasein. This fundamental ground of dialectics cannot be fully conceptualized because, as soon as one conceptualizes it, it is "denaturalized."

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).

son's description, one can see it operate in a passage he cites from Uspenskij in which metonymy is pushed to its extreme. It presents a "disintegrated portrait" in which, as Kamegulov says, "the reader is crushed by the multiplicity of detail unloaded on him in a limited verbal space, and is physically unable to grasp the whole, so that the portrait is often lost."<sup>35</sup> In Uspenskij's passage, as the text moves metonymically from one detail to the next, one loses any sense of an overall picture, of a unified object of the description; the portrait dissolves into the movement of its detail.

As metonymic, dialectics is not fundamentally a mode of thinking—thought to the second power—but a mode of articulation.<sup>36</sup> It is the setting up and setting forth of differences or contradictions. It is only in "differing" that the terms have existence or meaning; that is, the metonymic structure of differing is the process within which identity is constituted as a moment of the contradiction.

This articulation of difference is manifested in the various modes of praxis with which people engage the world and others. These modes can be seen as historical-semiotic codes, built upon the figure of metonymy. Such codes

are not static and hypostatized structures, but historical processes of "structuration." They can be read as systems of differences which function only by writing contradictions on the face of the reality within which people find themselves. But this is a reality always and already praxically and historically articulated and, hence, already full of contradiction. Dialectics cannot finally be located as a moment of consciousness, for the codes write the subject as they write the world. That is, the nature of individual existence is determined only by and in its differing from (and, as Derrida might say, deferring to) the other which it is not, a differing already articulated and always being articulated. Humans find themselves as what they are in the historical structure of differences articulated by the modes of praxis constituting their own historical existence.<sup>37</sup>

Such a reading of dialectics rejects any appeal to totality, unity, or self-identity. The notion of a transcendental subject, of a universal human nature, is itself a historically determined self-understanding, but one which does not exist outside of the codes of differences. The very idea of a self-sufficient, self-determining ego is meaningful only in contradistinction to that of a world existing independently of human involvement. And this difference is the product of the praxical codes which articulate human existence. That is, the belief in a Meadian "I"<sup>38</sup>—a non-

<sup>35</sup> A. Kamegulov, *Stil' Gleba Uspenskogo* (Leningrad, 1930), cited in Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in R. Jackson and M. Halle, *Fundamentals of Language*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 126; see Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud," in *Écrits: A Selection*, pp. 146-78. Obviously, this is a radical or intensive reading of terms that have no stable character in critical practice.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976). Derrida uses "articulation" in its original sense of a laying out of divisions. See Lawrence Grossberg, "Language and Theorizing in the Human Sciences," in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, ed. Norman K. Denzin (Greenwich, Ct.: J. A. I. Press, forthcoming), II, 189-231.

<sup>37</sup> It is obviously difficult to talk about this without falling into a language which reifies the process of structuration. Furthermore, by interpreting dialectics through post-structuralism or deconstruction, dialectics as discourse reaffirms and redefines the characteristics of dialectical thought given above. Finally, it suggests the re-interpretation of dialectical materialism into a theory of the determined and determinate relations among the variety of textualities in the social formation.

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of this notion in Mead's work, see Norbert Wiley, "Notes on Self Genesis: From Me to We to I," in Denzin, II.

determined source of creativity and individuality—is itself historically determined; the “I” is merely another “me.”

Consequently, dialectics cannot be a moment of consciousness, of subjectivity. It is, rather, a moment of reflexive language, a metalanguage constantly doomed to and acknowledging its own failure.<sup>39</sup> That is, dialectics is, itself, both determined by the codes it addresses as its topic and determines them in articulating its own system of differences. It cannot escape its own historical-praxical existence as and with other systems of differing.

Consequently, dialectics can be defined verbally only through a series of figures, of hermeneutic gestures. Dialectics is figurative discourse about the figurativeness of all discourse. It is a reading of the way in which a particular culture's praxical codes read humanity and the world. It is language reflecting on its own linguisticality. That is, it is language attempting to lay out a system of differences to account for the systems of differences already laid out by language. It is an attempt to examine the way in which language determines experience by setting forth systems of difference, for it is only within these systems of differences, of contradictions, that what something is appears to human perception. For example, in the work of Foucault,<sup>40</sup> it is a reading of the cultural systems of differences as rules of exclusion. Foucault argues that culture defines reality (i.e., what is) only by defining what is not. That is, a culture functions primarily by telling its members what cannot be thought, seen, or said. Dialectics is, finally (in a sense of the word too

often forgotten), rhetorical discourse of the rhetoricity of historical existence.<sup>41</sup>

### *Dialectics and Rhetoric III*

Dialectical discourse suggests the next movement in my attempt to delineate the domain of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism, for it provides a language of nonfunctional understanding. I will offer only a few brief remarks at this point.

First, rhetorical criticism is obviously a particular reading of discourse. It has been observed before that rhetorical criticism treats discourse as communication between a speaking subject and a listening other. Rhetoric is the theory of the immanence of language understood as communication; rhetorical criticism is a discourse about discourse as communicative. That is, its primary concern is how the relationship of speaker and audience is fashioned through the resources of language.

Second, the communicative dimension of discourse can be understood in terms of the dialectical theory of discourse. That is, discourse is the articulation of a particular set of differences. Communicative discourse is communicative precisely because it (reads itself in such a way as to) sets up and lays out the relationship between speaking subject and listening other in a particular way, in a particular structure of differing from one another. Communication is the discourse articulating the speaker and audience as differing and communicatively competent individuals. They stand in different relations to the discourse and to

<sup>39</sup> See Cary Nelson, “Reading Criticism,” *PMLA*, 91 (1976), 801-15.

<sup>40</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

<sup>41</sup> Dialectics is deconstruction; however, Derrida fails because his discourse does not/cannot acknowledge its own (political) determination. His discourse stops the movement of figures by its own process of exclusion, and thus undermines its own reflexivity. At this point, I should admit that I may no longer be in the domain of Marxist dialectics. The critique of all transcendentals (subject, object, and intersubjectivity) applies to Marxism as well.

one another and those relations are constituted by the discourse as communicative. But these relations—those of audience and speaker—may themselves differ in different social formations and in particular situations.

But rhetorical criticism, far from merely describing a kind of discourse, establishes it. Like all criticisms or metadiscourses, it is a reading which both determines and is determined by the differences it reads into and in the world. It establishes the very differences (speaker-audience) which it makes its topic. That is, rhetorical criticism is itself an articulation and constitution of the reality of the speaker and listener as transcendental subjects engaged in a mutual process of coming together (sharing) through the mediation of language. Thus, third, rhetoric is a particularly humanistic (in the sense of a "humanism") discourse, even when its particular form may hide the human subject temporarily in a functional discourse built upon persuasion and manipulation. Rhetoric is a discursive defense of the possibility of creating a shared reality among free and independent human subjects.

Consequently (and in conclusion), it seems mistaken to identify rhetoric and rhetorical criticism with critique (in the

sense of a Marxian or dialectical critical reading).<sup>42</sup> Because rhetorical discourse constitutes and projects a transcendental subject onto the world and into language (including its own discourse in the form of a critic who remains undetermined by a personal involvement with the discourse being read), it is unable reflexively to acknowledge its own determination. It is unable, without giving up its own concern, to question the nature and role of the subject within a particular social formation. Nor is rhetoric a general theory of the social construction of reality, since it involves the construction of a particular structure of social reality.<sup>43</sup> Both these understandings of rhetoric are grounded in a metaphorical theory of discourse, which fails to acknowledge its own determination. This is not a criticism of rhetoric, however; it is only to accept that rhetoric exists only in its contradictions, i.e., only in its relations to that which it is not.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Brant R. Burleson, "Rhetorical Criticism as the Critique of Ideology: The Perspective of Jürgen Habermas," paper presented at the 1978 annual conference of the Central States Speech Association, Chicago. The use of Habermas is particularly problematic since his "Marxism" is, itself, a nonreflexive articulation of the transcendental subject.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," *Central States Speech Journal*, 18 (1967), 9-17; and Thomas B. Farrell, "Knowledge, Consensus, and Rhetorical Theory," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 62 (1976), 1-14.



